



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

Roots of the crisis over Kashmir

written by Fred Goldstein

August 9, 2019



Colonial rule, class and national oppression

First published June 20, 2002

U.S. and British imperialism are working overtime to utilize the present crisis between India and Pakistan to their own advantage. Meanwhile, the reactionary regimes in Islamabad and New Delhi are vying with one another to gain the favor of the Bush administration in their struggle against one another in general and in the struggle over Kashmir in particular.

It is possible to engage in extended analysis and speculation about the immediate cause of the crisis. There is of course a decade of reactionary, anti-Muslim, Hindu

revivalism led by India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party since 1990—including the destruction of the Babri Masjid Mosque in 1992.

There is also the ascendancy of reactionary Islamic fundamentalist forces that had been nurtured and supported by the CIA and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan was the staging ground for an \$8-billion counter-revolutionary war against the progressive socialist Afghan government and the Soviet Union. These forces, many now opponents of the U.S., have inserted themselves into the struggle against the repressive Indian regime in Kashmir.

Some try to explain the present struggle over Kashmir by starting with 1947, when India was partitioned, Pakistan was created, and Kashmir became a disputed territory occupied by both countries.

However, one can't understand the 1947 partition and the horrendous religious conflict that followed — which dealt a great blow to the world forces of national liberation — without taking into account the 250 years of machinations by British colonialism that preceded.

British East India Company

It is useful to start the analysis in the middle of the 18th century with the predatory campaign of the British East India Company to conquer and plunder India. The EIC, which dated back to the days of Queen Elizabeth, was given a monopoly to conduct business in India by the British Parliament, acting on behalf of the financial and commercial interests of London. It was backed by the Royal Navy. It was given the right to raise troops and to undermine the Indian economy, to interfere in social and political relations and do anything necessary to bring a handsome profit back to its investors in London.

But military force alone was insufficient for a small island in the North Atlantic to

dominate such a vast landmass as India. Fortunately for the British ruling class, the EIC found a society that was fragmented into hundreds of states ruled over by a variety of petty rulers, held together only nominally by the declining Mogul empire.

The British conquered Bengal in 1757 and embarked on a century of creating “subordinate alliances.” The EIC would bestow local sovereignty on a ruler, make him subordinate to the company and to the British government, allow him some autonomy and guarantee protection against his enemies.

Whenever possible, the company would try to place a Muslim ruler over a majority Hindu population or a Hindu ruler over a majority Muslim population. They carried on this policy for over 100 years as they consolidated their conquest over the country. These subordinate alliances came to be known as “princely states.”

When India was partitioned in 1947, 550 such “princely states” were divided between India and Pakistan. This was the product of centuries in which the British colonialists brought the art of “divide and rule” to perfection.

British sold Kashmir in 1846

Kashmir is a vivid, concrete example of such subordinate alliances. With the infamous Treaty of Amritsar of 1846, the British created the present-day state of Kashmir, both geographically and socially, by selling part of the state of Lahore, which they had conquered, to a Hindu maharajah. This was in a territory that had been ruled historically by a Muslim empire and was predominantly Muslim in population.

The Treaty of Amritsar of 1846 declared that “The British government transfers and makes over, forever, independent possession [of the territory between the Indus River which constitutes Kashmir] to Maharajah Gulab Singh, and the male heirs of his body.” The surveying of the land was done by the British and the Gulab Singh

was obliged to recognize the British-defined borders. Gulab Singh paid the British government 7.5 million rupees and agreed there would be no changes without the consent of the British.

The British had the right to settle any disputes with neighboring states. The maharajah was required to send his military to serve the British military in case of any conflict. The maharajah could not hire any European or American without British permission. And in exchange “the British government will give its aid to Maharajah Gulab Singh in protecting his territories from external enemies.”

It was not long after the creation of Kashmir that the greatest uprising in Indian history took place, the Great Rebellion of native-born soldiers in the 150,000-man British colonial army. It is derogatorily called the “Sepoy Mutiny” by the colonialists. But it was a rebellion against the brutality and racist insensitivity of the British rulers, and it lasted from 1857 to 1859. In this rebellion Indian troops took over New Delhi and other cities and were only defeated after a furious struggle.

The rebellion was the first major manifestation of broad anti-British resistance, spontaneous and not politically organized. Soon a nationalist movement was born. It was moderate at first, seeking incremental change by which Indians could gain representation in the governing of India. By 1885 the first meeting of the Indian National Congress took place.

Formation of Congress Party

The Congress was composed of a majority of upper-caste Hindus. While there were Muslims in the Congress, other elements within the Muslim upper classes formed the Muslim League in 1906, with the encouragement of the British. For the following decades the fate of the anti-colonial movement in India hung on the relationship between the League and the Congress. Progressive forces in both organizations strove for unity. There were many progressive-minded Muslims with the Congress

Party on the basis of secular national unity.

Once they felt the rumblings of even the moderate bourgeois nationalist, reformist movement, the British imperialists went to work trying to divide it. On the one hand they showed their utter intransigence. Lord Hamilton, then secretary of state, sent a message to the viceroy in India on April 14, 1899, saying: "We cannot give the Natives what they want: representative institutions or the diminution of the existing establishment of Europeans is impossible."

On the other hand, they created separate election rolls in 1909 where those few who could vote — 1 percent — had to vote for candidates by religion. Under the guise of insuring the rights of minorities, the British channeled politics into the confines of religious rivalry rather than genuine representation. This process was deepened in 1919 when the colonial authorities were compelled to make reforms under the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

The forced participation of Indian troops on the side of their British oppressors in World War I, the support of the Russian Revolution for oppressed peoples of the world struggling to overthrow colonialism, and the 1919 anti-imperialist upsurge in China reverberated in India. The first trade unions were formed and mass resistance to British rule flowered. But Indian communists were unable to take root in a political environment dominated by the entrenched bourgeois nationalist movement led by the Congress.

Mahatma Gandhi put himself at the head of the mass movement. He brought pacifist tactics and moderate religious ideology to the struggle. His economic goals were reactionary: going back to a village economy.

Communist Party — gains and setbacks

In the late 1920s the Communist Party of India (CPI) made progress in the trade

union movement and the organization of the workers. In the 1930s it made a leap forward as a mass party in the struggle for class unity and national independence. But it suffered a huge, historic setback during World War II.

The war was a time of tempestuous mass struggle. Despite its moderate inclinations, the Congress was compelled to militantly oppose the British war effort. It had agreed to support the British if London would promise India independence. Whitehall stonewalled the movement and the Congress withdrew from all government posts. It began the “quit India” movement to force the British to withdraw.

By 1942 the British imperialists were in the worst crisis of rebellion since 1857. They had jailed over 60,000 people, including the entire Congress leadership. The Muslim League supported the British war effort and did not participate. The Soviet leadership pressed the CPI to support the war effort and suspend its struggle for independence until the war was over. The rationale was that since British imperialists were fighting the Nazis and the German imperialists were invading the Soviet Union, suspending the national struggle would be in defense of socialism.

This policy had similar tragic implications for the struggle of communists elsewhere in the British Empire, and in the French colonies and Latin America as well.

What Moscow did not take into account was that a revolutionary India could have been the greatest asset to the world revolution since 1917. In any case, the CPI lost an opportunity for revolutionary leadership at a moment of mass struggle.

The Congress, in spite of its militancy, was preparing for a negotiated withdrawal of the British and a managed transfer of power, rather than a revolutionary victory in the spirit of a genuine national liberation struggle. Bourgeois forces, dedicated to the preservation of capitalism, were fully in command and, as subsequent events proved, even the most progressive of them, represented by Jawaharlal Nehru, were

incapable of overcoming the communal divisions sown by British colonialism.

In 1940, at the Lahore conference, the die was cast when the Muslim League and its leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, abandoned once and for all its ambivalence about staying within a united India and declared for a separate Muslim state. Although this split was managed behind the scenes with the connivance of British imperialism, the groundwork was laid by the Hindu bourgeoisie, particularly the right-wing nationalists, who promoted religious chauvinism and persecuted the Muslim majority.

The last act of the British imperialists in India was to dictate the terms of the division between India and Pakistan. Lord Mountbatten, the last British viceroy, laid down the rules and they were accepted by the League and the Congress. All majority Muslim provinces under the British crown would go to Pakistan. All majority Hindu provinces would go to India. And the 550 “princely states” would choose, the decision being made by the ruler of each state.

Kashmir, strategically situated between India and Pakistan, was one of the largest “princely states.” It was over 70 percent Muslim and ruled by a Hindu feudal landlord, Maharajah Hari Singh, a descendent of the original ruler who had bought Kashmir from the British in 1846. Singh was trying to preserve maximum power and was toying with remaining independent.

The most popular leader in Kashmir, Sheik Abdullah, was a secular Muslim, the head of the All Kashmir Conference, which had had previous alliances with Nehru. Abdullah was dedicated to land reform and even raised the slogan of “Land to the tiller.” He was leaning towards independence because he was opposed to being put under the landlord regime of the Muslim League in Pakistan but was also opposed to being ruled by a landed aristocracy represented by the maharajah. He was thrown in jail.

The Pakistanis, using British military vehicles, sent military forces into Kashmir. Nehru consulted with Mountbatten and airlifted thousands of troops. Hari Singh, afraid for his throne, acceded to India. Sheik Abdullah was let out of jail and sent to New Delhi, where he agreed to accede to India on the basis of autonomy for Kashmir and the promise of a plebiscite to determine the final status. He became prime minister.

The war ended in 1948. The Indian forces gained the lion's share of the territory. The issue was referred to the UN, dominated by U.S. and British imperialism. There never was a plebiscite. The autonomous provisions agreed to by the Congress were gradually violated and the Indian bourgeoisie consolidated its control over Kashmir. A Hindu ruling group controlled a majority of Muslims. Sheik Abdullah was jailed off and on throughout the years by Nehru.

The issue of Kashmir stands unresolved today.

Nehru, the most progressive of the bourgeois leaders of the Congress, justified the takeover of Kashmir on his historic position that India should be united and that it was possible to build a democratic, secular society of national unity in which Muslims would be equal with the Hindu majority.

However, the deadlock gave rise to a national struggle and to repression by the Indian government.

A tide of reaction has now swept over the region; fundamentalist forces from Pakistan and Afghanistan are waging a struggle that amounts to an annexationist war, just as the Indian bourgeoisie de facto annexed its portion of occupied Kashmir in 1947. The genuine struggle for self-determination of the Kashmiris has become more and more difficult.

But the fundamental reason why the Congress in its most progressive phase could

not win the hearts and minds of the oppressed people of Kashmir is the same reason that it could not win the struggle for a unified India against the machinations of British imperialism: it represented the exploiting bourgeoisie.

India under Nehru

The Indian state was founded in a global environment of socialist revolution and national liberation. The Soviet Union had defeated the Nazis and was once again championing the anti-colonial struggle. The Chinese Revolution had driven out the landlords and, like the USSR, was embarking upon constructing a planned economy with cooperatives and collectives in the countryside and five-year plans in industry.

Under Nehru's guidance India was declared to be "socialist oriented." But this was just a cover for the Indian bourgeoisie and landlords to use state capitalist methods to overcome the deficit in industry and infrastructure inherited from British rule. Private Indian industrialists drew up three five-year plans for national development based on retaining capitalist exploitation. Known as the "Bombay Plan," the first was drawn up in 1944. It was modified after the new state was established.

The most urgent question in India for the masses was the land. Some landowners lost their most outrageous privileges. The government bought out many of the richest feudal landlords. But when the issue of limiting the amount of land that one person could have came up, the landlords in the Congress vetoed it.

The only way to overcome the 200 years of division sown on the Indian subcontinent by the British was to appeal directly to the class needs of the Indian workers and peasants of all religions, languages and nationalities. This was impossible for the exploiting classes of India, in spite of their socialist rhetoric and their diplomatic friendship with the USSR and with China in the early years. They had made a political transformation, not a social revolution.

Bourgeois experts will cite the complexities of Indian society and politics as the fundamental reason for the failure to unite. To be sure, India is an extremely complex social formation. It has 17 major languages and 35 others spoken by more than a million people. It has most of the major religions on the planet—Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Christianity, Judaism and more. It has numerous national and linguistic groups. Furthermore, it is torn by the caste system, with thousands of sub-castes.

But for all its complexity, the problem in India reduces itself to the problem of class exploitation and private property. All propertied classes, no matter how oppressed and abused they may have been by imperialism, require the obfuscation of class relationships of exploitation. They require the fog of religion, or ideological backwardness and confusion, to mask the fact that the substructure of society is built on accumulating the labor of the workers and the peasants in one form or another-on appropriating to the ruling class the social surplus.

Why Bolsheviks could but India couldn't

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was confronted with enormous national, linguistic and religious complexity that had been compressed into the tsarist empire, the “prison house of nations.” The revolution unearthed over 200 distinct language groups in its early days.

The Bolshevik government under Lenin declared to all the oppressed peoples of the empire that the Russian proletarian revolution would honor their right to self-determination. They had the right to decide whether to leave or join the Soviet Union—even though this ran the risk of having the oppressed nations abandon the revolution and leave the USSR truncated.

In fact, many of the national groups were Muslims who had been oppressed by the tsar and persecuted by the Russian military. They also had to fear the Russian

Orthodox Church. The Bolsheviks called a conference of Muslim communists in 1918 in order to show solidarity and make them feel comfortable within the framework of the new proletarian revolution, which was thoroughly internationalist.

Why could the Bolsheviks solve the national question, bringing all the oppressed peoples into a secular Soviet state with a Great Russian majority, while the Indian bourgeoisie could not? Because they not only offered to do away with tsarist oppressors, they also eliminated the exploiting capitalists and landlords. They could offer to honor all the national, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural characteristics without qualification. In other words, the Bolsheviks could overcome all divisions and antagonisms by meeting the concrete national demands of the oppressed. The proletariat, as a revolutionary class whose mission was to destroy class exploitation, had no interest in dividing the oppressed and the exploited.

National antagonisms only reemerged in the Soviet Union when capitalist elements took hold of the apparatus, beginning the degeneration that ultimately led to its collapse.

This historical experience is priceless, not only for oppressed countries like India and Pakistan, but for the United States, which has truly become the oppressor of all nations both at home and abroad. A class understanding of the national question shows that the struggle against national oppression is the indispensable first step on the road to uniting the workers and oppressed. But it cannot be fully consummated unless it is indissolubly linked to the struggle to end class exploitation.

